

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF GEORGIA
BRUNSWICK DIVISION

MICHAEL JEROME KING,

Plaintiff,

v.

HADLEY H. MANN; ROGER LANE; and
JONATHAN LOCKWOOD,¹

Defendants.

CIVIL ACTION NO.: 2:18-cv-39

ORDER and MAGISTRATE JUDGE'S REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Plaintiff, who is currently housed at Augusta State Medical Prison in Grovetown, Georgia, filed a Complaint, as amended, pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 contesting certain events which allegedly occurred in Wayne County, Georgia. (Doc. 6.) For the reasons set forth below, I RECOMMEND the Court DISMISS Plaintiff's Complaint based on his failure to state a claim, DIRECT the Clerk of Court to CLOSE this case and enter the appropriate judgment of dismissal, and DENY Plaintiff *in forma pauperis* status on appeal.²

¹ The Court DIRECTS the Clerk of Court to terminate "State of Georgia" as a named Defendant, as Plaintiff did not name this entity in his Amended Complaint. In addition, the Court DIRECTS the Clerk to amend "Robert Lane" to "Roger Lane" upon the record and docket of this case.

² A "district court can only dismiss an action on its own motion as long as the procedure employed is fair. . . . To employ fair procedure, a district court must generally provide the plaintiff with notice of its intent to dismiss or an opportunity to respond." Tazoe v. Airbus S.A.S., 631 F.3d 1321, 1336 (11th Cir. 2011) (citations and internal quotations marks omitted). A magistrate judge's report and recommendation provides such notice and opportunity to respond. See Shivers v. Int'l Bhd. of Elec. Workers Local Union 349, 262 F. App'x 121, 125, 127 (11th Cir. 2008) (indicating that a party has notice of a district court's intent to *sua sponte* grant summary judgment where a magistrate judge issues a report recommending the *sua sponte* granting of summary judgment); Anderson v. Dunbar Armored, Inc., 678 F. Supp. 2d 1280, 1296 (N.D. Ga. 2009) (noting that report and recommendation served as notice that claims would be *sua sponte* dismissed). This Report and Recommendation constitutes fair notice to Plaintiff that his suit is due to be dismissed. As indicated below, Plaintiff will have the opportunity to present his objections to this finding, and the presiding district judge will review *de novo* properly submitted objections. See 28 U.S.C.

BACKGROUND

In his Complaint, Plaintiff asserts Defendants Mann and Lockwood acted fraudulently “under the façade” of Georgia’s law and violated Plaintiff’s right to due process. (Doc. 6, p. 5.) Plaintiff contends all Defendants’ actions were “kinds of artifice to deceive” “contrary to legal and equitable duties”, and Defendants’ action caused injury to Plaintiff. (Id.)

STANDARD OF REVIEW

Plaintiff seeks to bring this action *in forma pauperis*. Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(1), the Court may authorize the filing of a civil lawsuit without the prepayment of fees if the plaintiff submits an affidavit that includes a statement of all of his assets, shows an inability to pay the filing fee, and also includes a statement of the nature of the action which shows that he is entitled to redress. Even if the plaintiff proves indigence, the Court must dismiss the action if it is frivolous or malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)–(ii). Additionally, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, the Court must review a complaint in which a prisoner seeks redress from a governmental entity. Upon such screening, the Court must dismiss a complaint, or any portion thereof, that is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted or which seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b).

The Court looks to the instructions for pleading contained in the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure when reviewing a complaint on an application to proceed *in forma pauperis*. See Fed. R. Civ. P. 8 (“A pleading that states a claim for relief must contain [among other things] . . . a

§ 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72; see also *Glover v. Williams*, No. 1:12-CV-3562-TWT-JFK, 2012 WL 5930633, at *1 (N.D. Ga. Oct. 18, 2012) (explaining that magistrate judge’s report and recommendation constituted adequate notice and petitioner’s opportunity to file objections provided a reasonable opportunity to respond). Additionally, Plaintiff has another opportunity to amend his Complaint to correct the deficiencies noted in this Report and Recommendation. See Fed. R. Civ. P. 15. Should Plaintiff seek to amend his Complaint, he must file any desired amendment within **fourteen (14) days** from the date of this Report and Recommendation.

short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief.”); Fed. R. Civ. P. 10 (requiring that claims be set forth in numbered paragraphs, each limited to a single set of circumstances). Further, a claim is frivolous under Section 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) “if it is ‘without arguable merit either in law or fact.’” Napier v. Preslicka, 314 F.3d 528, 531 (11th Cir. 2002) (quoting Bilal v. Driver, 251 F.3d 1346, 1349 (11th Cir. 2001)).

Whether a complaint fails to state a claim under Section 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) is governed by the same standard applicable to motions to dismiss under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6). Thompson v. Rundle, 393 F. App’x 675, 678 (11th Cir. 2010). Under that standard, this Court must determine whether the complaint contains “sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to ‘state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.’” Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007)). A plaintiff must assert “more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not” suffice. Twombly, 550 U.S. at 555. Section 1915 also “accords judges not only the authority to dismiss a claim based on an indisputably meritless legal theory, but also the unusual power to pierce the veil of the complaint’s factual allegations and dismiss those claims whose factual contentions are clearly baseless.” Bilal, 251 F.3d at 1349 (quoting Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 327 (1989)).

In its analysis, the Court will abide by the long-standing principle that the pleadings of unrepresented parties are held to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys and, therefore, must be liberally construed. Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972); Boxer X v. Harris, 437 F.3d 1107, 1110 (11th Cir. 2006) (“*Pro se* pleadings are held to a less stringent standard than pleadings drafted by attorneys”) (quoting Hughes v. Lott, 350 F.3d 1157, 1160 (11th Cir. 2003)). However, Plaintiff’s unrepresented status will not excuse mistakes

regarding procedural rules. McNeil v. United States, 508 U.S. 106, 113 (1993) (“We have never suggested that procedural rules in ordinary civil litigation should be interpreted so as to excuse mistakes by those who proceed without counsel.”).

DISCUSSION

I. Judicial Immunity

Judicial immunity bars Plaintiff’s claims against Defendant Lane. Congress did not abrogate the doctrine of judicial immunity when it enacted Section 1983. Judicial immunity is an absolute immunity, and it applies even when a judge acts maliciously. Bolin v. Story, 225 F.3d 1234, 1239 (11th Cir. 2000) (“Judges are entitled to absolute judicial immunity from damages for those acts taken while they are acting in their judicial capacity unless they acted in the clear absence of all jurisdiction.”); Stump v. Sparkman, 435 U.S. 349, 356 (1978) (holding judicial immunity doctrine applies in Section 1983 actions). Absolute immunity not only protects against liability but also against a case going to trial at all. Harris v. Deveaux, 780 F.2d 911, 914 (11th Cir. 1986) (citing Mitchell v. Forsyth, 472 U.S. 511, 526 (1985)). To determine whether a judge is entitled to absolute immunity from money damages under Section 1983, a two-part test was established in Stump: 1) whether the judge dealt with the plaintiff in a judicial capacity; and 2) whether the judge acted in the “clear absence of all jurisdiction.” Id. (quoting Stump, 435 U.S. at 357). The second prong of this test is “only satisfied if a judge completely lacks subject matter jurisdiction.” Id. at 916.

Plaintiff complains about the actions of Defendant Lane in his capacity as a judicial official in a case that was pending before him in which Plaintiff was a named party. Nevertheless, Plaintiff fails to make any claim whatsoever that Defendant Lane acted in the clear absence of jurisdiction. In fact, Plaintiff fails to make any articulable claims against Defendant

Lane. Consequently, the Court should **DISMISS** Plaintiff's Section 1983 claims against Defendant Lane based on judicial immunity principles.

II. Prosecutorial Immunity

Likewise, the Supreme Court has repeatedly reiterated that Section 1983 did not abrogate the doctrine of absolute prosecutorial immunity. See, e.g., Van de Kamp v. Goldstein, 555 U.S. 335, 342 (2009). “Today, absolute prosecutorial immunity extends to ‘acts undertaken by a prosecutor in preparing for the initiation of judicial proceedings or for trial, and which occur in the course of his role as an advocate for the State.’” Favors-Morrell v. United States, No. CV 214-164, 2015 WL 3766853, at *3 (S.D. Ga. June 15, 2015) (quoting Buckley v. Fitzsimmons, 509 U.S. 259, 273 (1993)); see also Rivera v. Leal, 359 F.3d 1350, 1353 (11th Cir. 2004) (“A prosecutor is entitled to absolute immunity from suit for all actions he takes while performing his function as an advocate for the government.”).

Plaintiff's claims against Defendant Mann pertain to her actions as an advocate for the State of Georgia and concern prosecutorial functions that are intimately associated with the judicial phase of the prosecution. See Van de Kamp, 555 U.S. at 342 (citing Kalina v. Fletcher, 522 U.S. 118, 127, 130 (1997)). Thus, the Court should **DISMISS** Plaintiff's claims against Defendant Mann under the doctrine of prosecutorial immunity.

III. Claims Against Public Defender

In order to state a claim for relief under Section 1983, a plaintiff must satisfy two elements. First, a plaintiff must allege that an act or omission deprived him “of some right, privilege, or immunity secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States.” Hale v. Tallapoosa County, 50 F.3d 1579, 1582 (11th Cir. 1995). Second, a plaintiff must allege that the act or omission was committed by “a person acting under color of state law.” Id.

The state-actor requirement traditionally precludes suit against a private party under Section 1983 because a private party may qualify as a state actor for Section 1983 purposes only in “rare circumstances.” Harvey v. Harvey, 949 F.2d 1127, 1130 (11th Cir. 1992). The Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals recognizes a private party as a state actor only when one of three tests is satisfied: “the state compulsion test, the public function test, or the nexus/joint action test.” Davis v. Self, 547 F. App’x 927, 933–34 (11th Cir. 2013) (citing Rayburn ex rel. Rayburn v. Hogue, 241 F.3d 1341, 1347 (11th Cir. 2001)).

A defense attorney, whether court-appointed or privately retained, represents only his client, not the state. Polk County v. Dodson, 454 U.S. 312 (1982). Accordingly, the law is well-established that “[a] public defender does not act under color of state law when performing a lawyer’s traditional functions as counsel to a defendant in a criminal proceeding.”” Pearson v. Myles, 189 F. App’x 865, 866 (11th Cir. 2006) (quoting Polk County, 454 U.S. at 325); see also Dixon v. Eaves, No. CV512-129, 2012 WL 6930306, at *3 (S.D. Ga. Dec. 26, 2012) (ineffective assistance of counsel allegations against plaintiff’s court-appointed attorney in criminal proceeding failed to state claim under Section 1983); Cobb v. Reeves, No. CV612-085, 2012 WL 5364302, at *4 (S.D. Ga. Oct. 4, 2012) (same). Thus, a defense attorney does not act “under color of state law,” a critical element of a Section 1983 claim. Because Defendant Lockwood acted as Plaintiff’s defense attorney and not as a public actor, Plaintiff cannot state a claim against him under Section 1983. Consequently, the Court should **DISMISS** Plaintiff’s claims against Defendant Lockwood.

IV. Leave to Appeal *in forma pauperis*

The Court should also deny Plaintiff leave to appeal *in forma pauperis*.³ Though Plaintiff has, of course, not yet filed a notice of appeal, it would be appropriate to address these issues in the Court's order of dismissal. Fed. R. App. P. 24(a)(3) (trial court may certify that appeal is not taken in good faith "before or after the notice of appeal is filed").

An appeal cannot be taken *in forma pauperis* if the trial court certifies that the appeal is not taken in good faith. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3); Fed. R. App. P. 24(a)(3). Good faith in this context must be judged by an objective standard. Busch v. County of Volusia, 189 F.R.D. 687, 691 (M.D. Fla. 1999). A party does not proceed in good faith when he seeks to advance a frivolous claim or argument. See Coppedge v. United States, 369 U.S. 438, 445 (1962). A claim or argument is frivolous when it appears the factual allegations are clearly baseless or the legal theories are indisputably meritless. Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 327 (1989); Carroll v. Gross, 984 F.2d 392, 393 (11th Cir. 1993). Stated another way, an *in forma pauperis* action is frivolous, and thus, not brought in good faith, if it is "without arguable merit either in law or fact." Napier v. Preslicka, 314 F.3d 528, 531 (11th Cir. 2002); see also Brown v. United States, Nos. 407CV085, 403CR001, 2009 WL 307872, at *1–2 (S.D. Ga. Feb. 9, 2009).

Based on the above analysis of Plaintiff's action, there are no non-frivolous issues to raise on appeal, and an appeal would not be taken in good faith. Thus, the Court should **DENY** Plaintiff *in forma pauperis* status on appeal.

CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing, I **RECOMMEND** the Court **DISMISS** Plaintiff's Complaint for failure to state a claim, **DIRECT** the Clerk of Court to **CLOSE** this case and enter the appropriate judgment of dismissal, and **DENY** Plaintiff leave to appeal *in forma pauperis*.

³ A certificate of appealability is not required in this Section 1983 action.

The Court **ORDERS** any party seeking to object to this Report and Recommendation to file specific written objections within fourteen (14) days of the date on which this Report and Recommendation is entered. Any objections asserting that the Magistrate Judge failed to address any contention raised in the Complaint must also be included. Failure to do so will bar any later challenge or review of the factual findings or legal conclusions of the Magistrate Judge. See 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(C); Thomas v. Arn, 474 U.S. 140 (1985). A copy of the objections must be served upon all other parties to the action.

However, Plaintiff may amend the Complaint to cure any deficiencies noted in this Report and Recommendation. See Fed. R. Civ. P. 15. Should Plaintiff seek to amend the Complaint, Plaintiff must file the amended complaint within **fourteen (14) days** from the date of this Report and Recommendation.

Upon receipt of Objections meeting the specificity requirement set out above, a United States District Judge will make a *de novo* determination of those portions of the report, proposed findings, or recommendation to which objection is made and may accept, reject, or modify in whole or in part, the findings or recommendations made by the Magistrate Judge. Objections not meeting the specificity requirement set out above will not be considered by a District Judge. A party may not appeal a Magistrate Judge's report and recommendation directly to the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. Appeals may be made only from a final judgment entered by or at the direction of a District Judge.

The Court **DIRECTS** the Clerk of Court to serve a copy of this Report and Recommendation upon Plaintiff.

SO ORDERED and REPORTED and RECOMMENDED, this 21st day of May, 2018.



R. STAN BAKER
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF GEORGIA